Reclaiming our Places: American Indians and Other Indigenous Peoples at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science

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The International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management

- Began in 1997 as a law and policy research institute.
- Resource is broadly defined to include, *inter alia*, natural resources, intellectual property, genetic resources, and cultural resources.
- We look beyond the horizon to see what dangers and opportunities await.
- The Institute is a boundary organization that facilitates collaboration and information flow between indigenous peoples and a wide range of institutions.
- For the past several years we have been working on issues of diversity in museums.
The Persistence of the Diversity Problem

• Notwithstanding the promulgation of diversity and inclusion policies by international organizations, museum associations, and museum professional organizations the diversity problem persists. For example, the Mellon Foundation’s *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey*, which studied the gender and ethnic diversity of AAMD member museums, found that twenty-eight percent (28%) of museum staffs are from minority backgrounds. The great majority of these workers are concentrated in security, facilities, finance, and human resources jobs. Among museum curators, conservators, educators and leaders, only four percent (4%) are African American and three percent (3%) Hispanic.

• Similarly, more than seventy percent (70%) of the board members of *Fortune* 500 companies are white and male, according to a 2013 study by the Alliance for Board Diversity. This is a small change from the approximately seventy-five percent (75%) of Caucasian male board members that a 2010 version of the study revealed. The report also found that women and minorities are underrepresented in board leadership positions.
But Exactly Whose Problem Is Diversity?

More accurately, the question is: who else has a diversity problem? The American Alliance of Museums, Diversity and Inclusion Policy, Diversity and Inclusion Framework hints at the answer to this question in the policy’s discussion of “Key Stakeholders”:

“Individuals, organizations and corporations of all types have the potential to offer insight and expertise on a broad range of strategies related to diversity and inclusion initiatives. We are committed to working collaboratively with key stakeholders locally, statewide, nationally, and internationally to strengthen the integrity, impact and relevance of museums.”
Owning Up to the Problem

- DAIC monthly meeting at DMNS.
- IIIRM-DAIC monthly indigenous film screenings and discussions at DMNS.
- Indigenous Film & Arts Festival film screenings at DMNS.
- DMNS, IIIRM, and European museums project: Restoring Ancestral Connections, [https://www.restoringancestralconnections.org/](https://www.restoringancestralconnections.org/). This project is a collaborative initiative made possible by the German Marshall Fund of the United States. It connects European museums with American Indian/Alaska Native communities to support mutually beneficial relationships and productive dialogue.
- Indigenizing special exhibits, *e.g.*, Cuba/Taino Daka; Da Vinci/Ruapekapeka and Great Plains fortified villages; Science of Pixar/animated shorts; and, Extreme Sports/shorts program.
- DMNS staff participation in IIIRM roundtables.
Owning Up to the Problem: The Grooviest Response Thus Far

• DMNS, IIIRM, DAIC, Denver Office of Storytelling, Reclaiming Ancestral Connections: A Virtual Homecoming for Our Diasporic Cultural Heritage supported by the Imagine 2020 Fund program administered by the Denver Arts and Venues.

• Just as there has been a diaspora of individuals, so too has there been a diaspora of cultural treasures, which now reside in museums around the world. Our project reconnects Denver’s American Indian community with treasures of their cultural heritage residing across the Atlantic.

• We will use the existing website to create a virtual homecoming for treasures of tribal heritage that have connections to Denver’s American Indian community. We will identify three key objects of cultural heritage in European museums, post a link to an image of each object on the website, and bring these objects to life through storytelling. For each object, we will record and post stories/songs/memories from members of Denver’s American Indian community and their families back home.
Conclusion

- Museums were created in part to reflect hegemonic impulses that are incompatible with diverse, multicultural societies. We think ourselves fortunate that the Denver Museum of Nature & Science has become an “agent of redemption in society,” undoing the hierarchies museums had previously helped to establish and enforce.
- Boundary organizations such as the International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management are also key players in the undoing those hierarchies.
- More importantly, we need entities grounded in community, such as the Denver American Indian Commission, to connect the Institute and our museum partners to the widely diverse American Indian publics that make Denver home.
- The Commission and Commissioners, and the Denver Museum of Nature & Science are helping to make museums places for the interrogation of cultural diversity, where stories are now richer and more inclusive.